

Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church
South corner of East 6th and East
Elizabeth Street
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3283

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

SACRED HEART ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

HABS TEX, 31-BROWN, 14-

Location: South corner of East 6th and East Elizabeth Street,
Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas.

Present Owner
and Occupant: Diocese of Brownsville, Texas.

Present Use: Mission Church of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

Significance: Sacred Heart Church was the first Catholic church for an English-speaking congregation in Brownsville. Built in 1913 by San Antonio architect Frederick B. Gaenslen, the church counted many of Brownsville's prominent English-speaking families including those whose names figure in Texas history.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: Although the church was dedicated on April 20, 1913, construction took place from 1912-1918. (Golden Jubilee.)
2. Architect: The architect for the church was Frederick Bowen Gaenslen, a San Antonio architect who specialized in Roman Catholic church design. Gaenslen was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1870. He attended St. Mary's College in San Antonio and graduated from Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a Master's degree in architecture. After working in Boston and Philadelphia he returned to San Antonio in 1896. Gaenslen's specialty was Roman Catholic church architecture; his best known work included St. Mary's Church, Incarnate Word College and Church, and the Ursuline Academy, all in San Antonio. Gaenslen was also one of the organizers of the Texas Society of Architects. He died in San Antonio in 1941 at the age of 71.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Sacred Heart Church is located on lots 5 and 6 of Block 52 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. The following references to the title of this property are found in the Cameron County Clerk's Office, Brownsville, Texas.

1862 Warranty Deed dated November 10, 1862, recorded Volume H, pages 316-317. Charles Stillman deeded lots 1-12 to the Reverend A. Gaudet. According to the Golden Jubilee booklet, Father Gaudet purchased this land to build a college.

1876 Warranty Deed dated July 3, 1876, recorded Volume D, pages 536-537. A. Gaudet, O. M. I., deeded lots 1-12 to the Missionary Society of Oblate Fathers of Texas.

1948 Warranty Deed dated March 10, 1948, recorded Volume 435, page 535. The Missionary Society of Oblate Fathers of Texas deeded lots 5, 6, 7, and 8 to the Most Reverend E. B. Ledvina, Bishop of Corpus Christi, Texas. (Brownsville was under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Corpus Christi at that time.)

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: None known.
5. Original plan and construction of the church: In January 1905, Father Christopher Smith, O. M. I., wrote to the Oblate Fathers' Provincial about the need for a new church and suggested the corner of East Elizabeth Street and 6th Street in the "American Quarter" as the site. The January 16, 1912, minutes of the meeting of the Oblate Provincial state that the Bishop had given permission for the church to be built and that \$15,000 had been pledged toward its construction. In 1912 the final plans were drawn and approved. On April 16, 1912, the bricks for the church had all been donated and a communication from the Father Provincial to the Consultors stated that "the contract has been given to construct the walls, the roof and the floor, and the interior of the church could be finished as money came in to pay for it." The problem of insufficient funds was to plague Sacred Heart Church throughout its construction, and explains why the church was under construction for a period of over six years. An article in the July 11, 1912, "Southern Messenger," the magazine of the San Antonio Diocese, stated that "the concrete had been poured and the brick work would soon begin." On September 6, 1912, the Oblate Fathers of Brownsville received authorization to borrow \$6,000 to pay for the roof since funds at hand had been exhausted. On January 29, 1913, Father H. A. Constantineau noted that the church was practically finished. On Sunday, April 20, 1913, Sacred Heart was dedicated and a Solemn High Mass was celebrated. The estimated cost of construction at this time was \$35,000, although the church was far from complete. The walls were unplastered and the church lacked its stained glass windows, an organ, and even confessionals. The Golden Jubilee booklet states that the church consisted of "four brick walls, a metal ceiling, and the wooden floor." The first pastor of the church lived in the tower since the new parish could not yet afford to have a rectory.

A March 16, 1915, letter from Father Frignon, the church's second pastor, to Father Antoine, compared the interior of the church to the interior of a warehouse. Mrs. Agnes A. Browne advanced money from her will so that the interior could be completed. Using her gift of \$6,600 a \$2,000 organ was purchased, pews were installed, and sidewalks were built around the church. In 1918 the stained glass windows, donated by various parishioners, were put in place. Of particular interest was a stained glass window of the Good Shepherd in the choir loft, which was purportedly by Tiffany. The various altars, the baptismal font, statues, and the shrine of Our Lady of perpetual Help were also donated while Father Frignon was pastor (1914-1930). The Golden Jubilee booklet, see Supplemental Material, goes into great detail about the completion of the church.

6. Alterations and additions: The 1933 hurricane, which caused severe damage in Brownsville, did over \$5,000 worth of damage to the church. Most of the roof was damaged. The church was subsequently repaired and redecorated, and a new organ and new chimes were installed.

Around 1955, air conditioning was installed at a cost of nearly \$19,000. Between 1957 and 1963 the interior of the church was painted, the original metal ceiling over the side aisles replaced with acoustical tile, the statues and Stations of the Cross repainted, the roof was again replaced, and two new confessionals replaced the original one. The church was not boarded up before Hurricane Beulah in 1967, consequently considerable damage was done to the stained glass windows, particularly the purported Tiffany window over the choir loft. The main altar was also damaged. Only makeshift repairs have been made.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

1. Sacred Heart Church was the first English-speaking parish in Brownsville. Prior to its construction, there were virtually two separate parishes at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. There were approximately 6,000 Mexican-Americans in the congregation and only 250 Anglo-Americans. Separate services and catechism classes were provided in English and priests had to be bilingual to accommodate the needs of both the Spanish and English-speaking parishioners. The Oblate Fathers' Provincial Council recognized the difficulties inherent in this situation and voted that separate Mexican and American congregations be established not only in Brownsville but in the rest of the Rio Grande Valley as well. Sacred Heart parish grew very slowly. In 1913 there were only fifty families even though the parish encompassed territory reaching up to San Benito, Texas. In 1928 and 1932 the parish numbered seventy-five families with approximately 500 people attending mass. In 1937 there were 387 parishioners, a total which increased to 612 in 1948. By 1951 membership increased to 425 families (850 parishioners). This total nearly doubled in the next two years and in 1953 there were over 1500 parishioners. The parishioners included many of the most prominent families in the area including descendants of the Kenedy and Cavazos families, the Putegnats, the Brownes, the Celayas, the Kowalskis, and many others whose names are listed in the Golden Jubilee Souvenir booklet.
2. At least eight pastors were associated with Sacred Heart, all Oblates of Mary Immaculate. These include Jean Baptiste Lavoie (1913), Jean Baptiste Frignon (1914-1930), Paul Lewis (1930-1935), William Joseph Moore (1935-1951), Daniel J. Lynch (1951-ca. 1956), John A. Collins (1956-1957), and George F. Sexton and Cornelius Scanlin who were ministers in 1963. Lavoie and Frignon were French Canadians. Father Lewis was descended from a pioneer Texas family and was the founder and editor of Mary Immaculate, a national magazine of Oblate news. He also founded the Catechists of St. John Bosco.

3. About 1970 Sacred Heart was made a mission of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and the parish of St. Mary, Mother of the Church, was created. The St. Mary parish held Mass at Sacred Heart until 1971 when they moved to a hall which was used until their present building was constructed. Currently one Mass a week is said in Sacred Heart which has been put up for sale by the Diocese of Brownsville.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Telephone conversation with Father Albrecht, O. M. I., Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, July 27, 1977. Father Albrecht furnished general information about Sacred Heart Church.

Telephone conversation with Ed Gamble, Chancery of the Diocese of Brownsville, July 27, 1977. Mr. Gamble provided information on Sacred Heart parish after 1963.

Interviews with Mrs. R. E. Wagner, 245 East St. Charles Street, Brownsville, Texas, on July 22, 1977. Mrs. Wagner was a long-time parishioner at Sacred Heart and was very active in the church. She still attends Mass there and provided information about the physical changes and alterations to the church since 1963.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey. Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased). Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Company, 1956. (An entry on page 227 refers to Frederick B. Gaensen (sic), really Gaenslen, who designed Sacred Heart Church.)

D. Supplemental Material:

Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Dedication of Sacred Heart Church, Brownsville, Texas (1913-1963). [Out of print. Xeroxed copy in HABS.]

Prepared by: Betty Bird
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Project Historian
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This twentieth-century Gothic Revival structure is typical of the architecture of Brownsville and is in danger of demolition.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The sixty-five foot (three-bay front) building is approximately one hundred forty feet long. It is one story in height, in a cruciform plan, with an apse.
2. Foundation: Foundations throughout are of brick, with a brick water table.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Walls are of brick in common bond, buff colored, with windows flanked by buttresses. There is brick cornice work on the face of the gable end above the entrance, and a stone cap on the parapet with a stone cross on both front and rear gables. A brick stringcourse joins the opening on the sides at the springing line of the arches. There is a brick projecting course at the eaves. Brick treatment in the walls echos the flat and/or pointed arches of windows and doors.
4. Structural system, framing: The structural system is composed of brick load-bearing walls with wood framing. A row of columns at the side aisles support the barrel valut of the nave.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a recessed porch in the center of the front facade, with three sets of concrete steps, three risers high, leading up to the porch floor. The entrance to the porch is marked by three pointed arches with keystones rising from paired engaged stone columns with capitals set at each portal. Each juncture of the paired columns is marked by a small buttress of the same height, which extends at the base into a brick pedestal, each in turn separated by ranks of four stone steps. An aluminum handrail serves one of the lateral sets of steps. The keystones of the arches are decorated with sacred emblems. The floor of the porch is concrete and the central porch ceiling is beaded wood paneling with a cornice molding. There is a small concrete stoop at each side serving the transept. It is reached in the recessed front transept wall facing the street to the northeast, and served by concrete steps. Six concrete steps serve each rear door of the sacristy.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: On the northeast facade, the principal entrance is a tall double opening, flanked by a tall single doorway on each side, the whole in a tripartite arrangement. The doors are each made of three vertical wood panels with wood surrounds and metal thresholds. There is a tall leaded, stained-glass transom above each door.

At each end of the porch is a small pointed-arch doorway leading into each tower. These two-panel wood doors have wood surrounds, metal thresholds, wood sills, and a stained-glass transom.

A double opening at the front face of each arm of the transept leads to the interior. These wood panel doors have wood surrounds, wood sill, metal threshold, a rectangular wooden transom panel immediately above the door, and a pointed arch with stained-glass transom above it. A doorway leads from the sacristy on each side of the altar to the rear exterior. The flush wood panel door has wooden surrounds and sill and a metal threshold. There is a pointed arch with stained-glass transom above each sacristy door.

- b. Windows and shutters: The pointed-arch windows in the nave (now with metal screen protection) have biblical scenes in stained glass. There is a projecting brick course at the top of the arches and a stone keystone. The windows have brick exterior sills, wood interior sills, and wood surrounds. There is a large semi-circular arched stained-glass window each end of transept. Windows were donated by parish members and societies.

In the apse are smaller pointed-arch stained-glass windows. Windows in the first floor of the tower are frosted, patterned glass shutters with a pointed-arch fixed-glass top panel. They have wood surrounds and wood sills.

The upper tower windows are wood framed, fixed, triple vertical panels with patterned, frosted glass. There is a wood surround with wood interior sill and brick exterior sill.

Of particular interest is a window in the choir loft called locally a "Tiffany" window, which depicts the Good Shepherd. Referred to also as "a priceless piece of imported art" in the Golden Jubilee booklet, it is most likely that "Tiffany"--which would have been domestic glass--was a term used in general reference for all colored glass, and that this window, being imported, must have come from the artisans of Europe.

This "Tiffany" window is in the middle of the central gable wall, just behind and directly over the main entrance porch. The window is divided by two heavy mullions into three panels, each divided by two heavy mullions into three panels, each divided by the horizontal muntins into two parts. The pointed-arch window has three fixed metal frames, wood surrounds, and a wood sill, and is protected now by a hail screen.

In the gable ends of the transept there is a round attic opening with wood louvres.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The nave has a gable roof with asphalt shingles and brick parapet at gable ends. The side aisles have a shed roof with asphalt shingles, metal gutter, and downspout. The apse has a hipped roof with asphalt shingles, and the sacristy, on each side of the apse, has flat roofs with built-up roofing and gravel.
- b. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There are two two-level brick towers, four-sided, one on each side of the main entrance, with corner buttresses extending to the top, their diminishing stages capped with stone truncated gablets. The flat roof of the tower has asphalt covering and a brick parapet, slightly gabled in the center of each face, with metal downspouts extending from the roof. Near the top of each tower there are paired metal louver panels beneath segmental brick arches screening the bell chamber on each face of the tower.

C. Description of the Interior

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The main entrance opens into the nave, which has side aisles. A doorway through the confessionals on the northeast wall leads into the towers. The nave extends to the transept which has a doorway each side on the northeast wall to the exterior. Four large columns with a half-column at front and rear divide the center aisle from the side aisles, but stand well within the seating ranks rather than at the ends of the pews. The altar is divided from the nave by a communion rail, and is elevated one step. There is a niche on each side of the large arched opening to the apse. The hexagonal apse contains the high altar, and is raised two steps. There are three openings on each side of the apse that lead into the sacristy on each side. On the southwest wall of each sacristy is a doorway leading to the exterior.

- b. Second floor: The second floor or level is visible only in the choir loft above the exterior doors at the rear of the nave. It is reached by a stairway in the east tower, leading to a small room, possibly a robing room, that leads in turn to the choir loft. It has a three-sided parapet that extends slightly into the nave. There is a small room in the north tower at this level that houses mechanical equipment.
2. Stairways: The half-turn stairway with landings leading to the choir loft has a closed string and a solid wood rail, decorated with wood trefoil arches. There is a simple wood handrail on top of the paneled railing. The railing extends from a newel at the first floor up to the second floor, turns, and ends at the wall. The wood railing on the second floor has the trefoil as voids. The wood treads are covered with linoleum covering, and a beaded wood-panel wainscot with railing extends along the wall side of the stairway.
 3. Flooring: There are narrow wood boards, with linoleum covering, on the aisles and at the altar, for flooring.
 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are of painted plaster. The barrel vaulted ceiling over the nave is pressed tin, with pressed metal center beam, ribs, and cornice. The ceiling over the side aisles is faced with acoustical tile. The plastered walls end at a projecting plastered base. The tall Tuscan columns, with simple capital, resting at head-level on columnar bases, are also plastered.
- A chair rail extends at window-sill height around the side aisles. The large arched opening to the altar has a rolled plaster trim, ending at the springing line with plaster pendants. The ceiling in the altar is plastered, sloping at the perimeter through a slight cove set off by plaster molding at its base and a plaster cornice at the juncture of cove and ceiling.
6. Doorways and doors: Doors on the first floor are flush panel doors, with hollow core, of wood, with wood surrounds. Second-floor doors are of wood paneling with molded wood trim.
 7. Church furnishings and acouterments: Windows were only a part of the gifts made to the church by its members. Altars, statues, a baptismal font and a shrine were also donated to the church commemorating the parish families.
 8. Special decorative features, trim, cabinet work: The communion rail is of natural finished oak that is intricately carved with pointed arches and capiteled columns with heavy base between the arches. In each pointed arch is a trefoil-arch panel with trefoil panel above it. Some doorways in the apse have heavily decorated surrounds and paneled soffits. Two of the doors have Gothic tower design on each side with a Bontonnée cross (a cross whose members end in rounds, like buttonhole closures) on top of the pointed arch. Others have the Gothic tower design, but no cross.

The splayed railing around the choir loft is paneled, similar to the altar rail, underneath a heavy wood frieze just below a flat wood railing on top. The projected part of the balcony has a beaded-wood soffit.

9. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: There is a gas-fired space heater and modern air-conditioning equipment in the church.
- b. Lighting: From two faces of each of the columns supporting the barrel-vaulted ceiling of the nave there is a projecting light fixture with small hanging frosted-glass shade. Directly in the center of the barrel vault hangs a large brass ring suspended by chains from a brass sphere in the base of a steel rod. From the ring there are suspended twenty-four small lamps with globe shades. One large glass globe shade hangs in the center.

Three similar but small fixtures hang in the transept, with six lamps suspended by a metal ring.

Above the cornice of the springing line of the barrel vault is a series of bare light bulbs projecting slightly from the wall on each side and outlining in light the springing line of the vault.

At the rear of the nave, hanging over the main entrance, is a fixture that has a brass cylinder supported by a brass arm with two glass shades hanging from the arm.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church, facing northeast on Elizabeth Street, sits on the southwest side of the street at the intersection with East 6th Street. Across Elizabeth Street is a commercial property. Beside the church, on its southeast side, is a boys' home, the combined yards of both structures marked off by a chain link fence. An asphalt paved parking lot lies on the southwest side of the church, with a brick wall around it. There is a concrete paving on the northwest and northeast sides extending from the building to the street.

Prepared by: John P. White
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1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.